

Chapter 2

Steps in Building Evidence-Based Programs for Adolescents

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Good programs are built upon an explicit, appropriately paced learning process. It is fair to say that learning never stops. At a minimum, the following steps are suggested to build effective programs serving diverse subsets of adolescents:

1. Gather and analyze data on adolescents—grouped by age, gender, marital and schooling status, residence, and other relevant variables—through careful situation analyses and other research methodologies.
2. Conduct stakeholder review/insight gathering/planning based on as much comprehensive, coherent data as are available.
3. Estimate the number and determine the characteristics of adolescents reached—and not reached—by governmental and nongovernmental policies and programs.
4. Review the relevance and scope of program content with respect to various subgroups of adolescents (differentiated by age, gender, marital and schooling status, residence, and other relevant categories).
5. Implement an information-gathering process that yields insights into the differential needs and aspirations of various subgroups of adolescents (again, differentiated by age, gender, marital and schooling status, residence, and other relevant categories).

1. Gather and analyze data on adolescents—grouped by age, gender, marital and schooling status, residence, and other relevant variables—through careful situation analyses and other research methodologies.

In most settings there are data bases through which to view some of the key dimensions of adolescent life (though this information is not always conveniently organized). In almost no setting is this data base sufficient, but it is a starting point.

The Population Council has compiled 14 standard tables from Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data on adolescents in 47 countries, drawn from three DHS

sources: household surveys, interviews with females in households, and (where available) modules describing boys' and men's experience (see Chapter 3 for more on these tables).

These data raise important questions and suggest the need for further data collection.

They also suggest that there are many facts about adolescent life to which we are paying insufficient attention.

The Population Council tables currently available for most countries—sorted by age, gender, and marital and schooling status (where of possible relevance)—include:

- Residence status (urban/rural)
- Living arrangements
 - Parental survival status and residence in household
 - Characteristics of head of household
- Educational enrollment and attainment
 - In urban areas
 - In rural areas
 - Comparison of urban and rural areas
- Marital status
 - Married by age 15
 - Married by age 18
 - Married by age 20
- Adolescent activity and work status
 - Works for income
 - Works (for income) and goes to school
 - Works (for income) and has/does not have children
 - Not working, not in school, “doing nothing”
- Sexual activity and childbearing
- Reproductive health knowledge, behavior, and special risks
 - Awareness and use of modern contraceptive methods
 - Awareness of HIV/AIDS
 - Experience with sexually transmitted infections
- Female genital circumcision (not collected for certain countries)

Collecting data about adolescents is not always straightforward (particularly when dealing with certain subgroups, such as very young and married adolescents). To

supplement the picture presented by data on 10–19-year-olds, we include data on somewhat older individuals (those aged 20–24 or 25–29, for example). In some settings, where more in-depth or qualitative data have been gathered, learning about the experiences of 10–14-year-olds has included questioning those who are currently over 15 about what their lives were like at an earlier age. The youngest adolescents (ages 10–12) are often highly reticent, and cannot be drawn out effectively in focus groups. Often one-on-one interviews are most effective with them.

Some data bases allow aggregation of data by region, which could be highly desirable for planning purposes. There are often stark regional, national, and local differentials in the experience of adolescent girls and boys—e.g., their marriage rates vary considerably. For example, though overall about 40 percent of girls in Pakistan marry by age 20, there are regions of the country, such as Balochistan, where this percentage rises to 73.

UNICEF situation analyses are used for internal and country-level planning purposes, but their results are not reported outside the institution because of difficulty in locating and confirming data sources and related concerns about data quality. UNICEF recognizes that the DHS is the “gold standard” in places where these surveys are undertaken. Where they are not, UNICEF may have conducted a multi-center household survey quite similar to the DHS (see Chapter 3). Another excellent source of data available through the United Nations is the Living Standards and Measurement Surveys, conducted by the World Bank, which generate reliable information (including micro-economic data) from large, nationally representative samples.

2. Conduct stakeholder review/insight gathering/planning based on as much comprehensive, coherent data as are available.

Disaggregation of information on adolescents is a first step—but it is only as valuable as the discussions that follow on data analysis. Once relevant data are available, it is vital to have discussions with as many stakeholders in adolescent welfare present as possible to review information, confirm or disconfirm commonly assumed facts, and (just as important) discover contradictions between what people believe to be true about adolescent lives and what the data prove to be true.

For example, it is often assumed that adolescents form a stable population relative to adults. In fact, up to 40 percent of boys and girls aged 12–14 in some rural districts of sub-Saharan Africa live away from their natal family, often with neither parent, in fostering arrangements, domestic service sites, or other work venues.¹

3. Estimate the number and determine the characteristics of adolescents reached—and not reached—by governmental and nongovernmental policies and programs.

In countries where there is a relatively high priority attached to youth programs, there is often little attention given to purposefully differentiating the intended and actual audiences of youth-serving programs, or to gathering reliable data on youth participation in, and entitlement to, government-sponsored programs. Even officially reported schooling data should not necessarily be accepted *prima facie* as correct (for example, recent work in Kenya, conducted by the Population Council in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, discovered striking differences in enrollment figures collected

¹ Further discussion of adolescent living arrangements can be found in Barbara Mensch, Judith Bruce, and Margaret E. Greene. 1998. *The Uncharted Passage*. New York: Population Council.

from observations in schools and those reported by districts for the purpose of collecting revenues).

Even where the four most popular types of youth programs (youth centers, school-based programs, “youth-friendly” services, and peer education) are in relatively high gear, there is rarely a clear delineation of which subsets of youth are most engaged in—and which are left out of—these programs. Nor do we know the relative effectiveness of each type of program for different subgroups of adolescents.

Where youth programs are well utilized, the question remains: by whom? Are those served by youth programs, in fact, young people? Are they the most needy young people? And, again, what subgroups of adolescents are not being served by these programs? Even fairly superficial inquiries may reveal programmatic overattention to the needs of a specific group and neglect of other important groups of adolescents. (How many programs serve the needs of married 15-year-old girls, for example?)

Programs may fail to reach certain groups of adolescents because they operate on the basis of incorrect assumptions about where adolescents can be found and, therefore, where efforts to reach them ought to be directed. There is a widespread belief that adolescents can reliably be found in school and/or living with one or both parents—but this is often not the case. A great many young people do not live in their natal home (as a result of marriage, migration for work, or family breakdown) or have left school before the bulk of their adolescence is completed. Strategies for identifying and reaching this internally diverse population of young people should be a priority.

School-based programs are popular, yet often they are fielded without an analysis of who is actually in secondary school—to say nothing of the effectiveness of programs in schools of variable quality, staffed by overworked teachers grappling to provide

sometimes controversial content. Out-of-school girls ages 15–19 may be a majority; Population Council analyses revealed that only 8 percent of 15–19-year-old girls in Senegal, 12 percent of those in Kenya, 25 percent in Bangladesh, and 59 percent in Mexico were enrolled in secondary school (DHS data, mid-1990s). More useful discoveries such as these will be made as program planners and policymakers go through the exercise of evaluating which adolescents are and are not being reached by existing programs.

Worksheet 1

Worksheet 1 (appended to this paper) is an example (in draft form) of a tool designed to capture, over the course of a week or month, the characteristics of individuals actually served by a program. Ideally this information should be collected by alert observers, who record information about every person who accesses program resources (e.g., services or information).

Another way of obtaining information about who is and is not being reached by programs for adolescents would be to interview program directors and ask them whom they plan to serve and whom they *think* they serve. Many youth programs are unintentionally devoting major resources to serving older male adolescents, who may come to dominate programs. While these young males undoubtedly have needs, they may not be as vulnerable and needy as other (notably female) adolescents. Furthermore, their dominant presence may preclude young females from program participation (see Chapter 5).

We currently have so little knowledge of who actually uses youth programs that even these rough, nonscientific approaches will provide very useful programmatic insights. Even a quick examination of policies and programs is likely to reveal an absence

of attention to groups that are of considerable size and highly vulnerable, including married girls, out-of-school youth, and those employed in domestic service, as well as those living in unstable and unsafe environments in their home, community, or society (including young refugees).

4. Review the relevance and scope of program content with respect to various subgroups of adolescents (differentiated by age, gender, marital and schooling status, residence, and other relevant categories).

For both political and programmatic purposes, policies addressing adolescents should not be confined to one sector. Policy that is narrowly problem-centered and focused on a single sector, rather than being based on a broad development/rights-oriented agenda, limits the scope and effectiveness of adolescent programming. *A single-sector approach narrows the field of decisionmakers and advocates available to fight for adequate levels of investment in young people. It also misses the opportunity for synergistic interactions between different types of programmatic approaches, such as efforts to improve adolescents' health and economic status.* In some settings, youth policy has become so closely identified with particular controversial issues, such as sexual activity among the unmarried, that it has become stigmatized. A development/rights-based agenda will not only better reflect the real needs of adolescents, it will also likely be more politically “saleable.”

Girls' education (generally a less controversial subject than family life education) is a priority in many settings in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia—yet, it is not publicly presented or viewed as a keystone of youth policy. In societies where a high proportion of young people, early childbearing, and rapid population growth are interlinked issues, the message about increasing girls' access to secondary school may

increase policy interest in girls' education. In such settings, girls' education may be more effective than family life education in promoting population-change variables, such as the average age at which females marry and begin childbearing in a society. There continues to be a close link between the time girls spend in school and their age at marriage and first childbirth (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Worksheet 2

Above we discussed the importance of discerning which groups of young people are reached by programs (using Worksheet 1 or other means). A parallel exercise should be undertaken to inventory the content of programs offered by governments and nongovernmental organizations. Worksheet 2 is an example (in draft form) of the sort of tool that could be used to help determine which programmatic "entry points" (health, education, work, etc.) are claiming the bulk of programmatic attention and resources. Many programs offer a mix of activities, but most have one or two key programmatic points of entry. Worksheet 2 asks for some estimation of the percentage of effort focused on each entry point and asks which activity/activities are leading entry points for program participants. Because there is often considerable overlap among programmatic activities, this tool will be broadly indicative, serving as a very general guide to help identify neglected subject matters and neglected subsets of youth.

When information about which groups of adolescents programs intend to serve and which are actually being served is combined with data on program content, it is likely to reveal that particular types of activities are concentrated on particular subsets of adolescents. It is also likely to show that some adolescents are completely left out, and some important subject matter is barely touched upon, in programs for adolescents. For

example, we would likely find (in some countries at least) that the emphasis is on reaching older adolescents—de facto males—through activities in the health sector. Activities conducted in schools may emphasize health and family life education only. Out-of-school youth may be reached principally through youth centers, which (as noted earlier) are often dominated by males, some of whom may, in fact, be too old to be considered “youth” (again, see Chapter 5).

5. Implement an information-gathering process that yields insights into the differential needs and aspirations of various subgroups of adolescents (differentiated by age, gender, marital and schooling status, residence, and other relevant categories).

There is justifiable interest in, and emphasis on, the participation of young people in settings where adolescent programs are designed and evaluated. In practice, however, this youth participation is often highly biased to reflect the perceptions and needs of more educated, economically advantaged teenagers. It is extremely effective to include bright young people in public meetings, but it is no substitute for a more careful process of assessing the needs and aspirations of all young people (some of whom may be less inclined to articulate their needs and advocate for themselves).

Several years ago, as part of the planning process for the Adolescent Girls’ Project in Jordan (sponsored by UNICEF and UNFPA and funded by UNF), boys and girls were broken into separate groups and were asked, “What is it like to be a girl? What is it like to be a boy?” This process successfully included boys and girls without homogenizing their perspectives. Not surprisingly, significant differences were found in these perspectives (very few boys wanted to be girls, for example). The process also revealed that boys had a relatively clear understanding of some of the issues that girls

faced. Such exercises may generate a more realistic picture of girls' and boys' differential experience, while simultaneously fostering empathy across gender and other lines.

Peer education has generated excitement, but in many cases has been planned with very little data on adolescents' social networks. Whom do young people identify as their peers? What boundaries do they cross or not cross in connecting with peers? Do married adolescents talk to unmarried adolescents? Do boys talk to girls? Do younger and older adolescents speak to each other? Do those enrolled in school talk to those not enrolled? We need to answer these questions before youth peer networks can be tapped effectively to help promote adolescent well-being.

To our knowledge, one of the most difficult groups to reach through a participatory process will be married adolescent girls. These girls typically live under a many-leveled gatekeeping system, which sequesters them from outside influence and limits their social interactions. Having been removed from their natal homes at marriage, adolescent wives and mothers often lose their link to their parents (at least day-to-day) and must submit to the authority of their husband and in-laws. In some countries, most girls will be married or “promised” for marriage, by age 18.

Diagnostic and participatory exercises must differentiate the needs of adolescents who are unmarried, promised for marriage, and married. In countries with a high proportion of married adolescents (e.g., countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa), collecting information on adolescents of different marital status, and on the process girls undergo en route to marriage, should be a priority. It is likely that the classic “youth forum” approach will not work as a way to learn about married adolescent girls. Reaching them may require targeted, individual interviews as well as focus groups. (See

Chapter 9 for a diagnostic interview schedule being employed experimentally in Burkina Faso).

The youngest adolescents are obviously less mature, typically more reticent than older adolescents, and may be difficult to engage even in small group exercises. It may be necessary to interview the youngest adolescents individually. Another way of gathering information on their lives is to interview slightly older adolescents about the lives of younger brothers and sisters and/or what their lives were like at an earlier age.

We must hear from—and really listen to—young people and build on their insights. We should not, however, always expect them to be able to participate on a large scale and over a long term in finding programmatic solutions to their problems. The most disadvantaged youth (such as married adolescent girls) may not be able to join in peer education programs. The poorest among them may not be able to sustain participation if they are expected to serve long-term on a volunteer basis, taking time away from activities that generate more immediate economic returns to their households (see Chapter 5).

Another effective way to engage young people and their parents is to learn what kind of program content would be acceptable and of interest to them. Different groups of adolescents and their parents have often identified concerns about livelihoods and future employment as a top priority—yet, only a small proportion of programs for adolescents deal with these subjects. An inquiry into the needs and aspirations of various groups of adolescents (differentiated by age, gender, marital and schooling status, and urban/rural residence, where relevant) could uncover the subjects of most concern and the program content likely to be most attractive to different groups of young people. These data could

be compared to findings from Worksheet 2, which might reveal mismatches between what young people identify as their needs and what current program content addresses.

The five steps laid out in this paper provide a preliminary map to guide those seeking to build evidence-based programs for adolescents. These steps are bound to be refined and expanded as they are put into action in diverse settings. However, they offer a starting point for researchers, program planners, and policymakers to consider how best to improve upon existing policies and programs for adolescents in developing countries.

Worksheet 1
Who Uses Programs for Adolescents?

	Number of adolescents in each category seen in the last 30 days	# of 10-14-year-olds	# of 15-19-year-olds	# of girls	# of boys	# of adolescents in school	# of adolescents out of school	# of married adolescents
Girls								
1. Unmarried girls aged 10-14, in school	A	A		A		A		
2. Unmarried girls aged 10-14, out of school	B	B		B			B	
3. Unmarried girls aged 15-19, in school	C		C	C		C		
4. Unmarried girls aged 15-19, out of school	D		D	D			D	
5. Married girls* aged 10-14	E	E		E			E	E
6. Married girls* aged 15-19	F		F	F			F	F
Boys								
7. Unmarried boys aged 10-14, in school	G	G			G	G		
8. Unmarried boys aged 10-14, out of school	H	H			H		H	
9. Unmarried boys aged 15-19, in school	I		I		I	I		
10. Unmarried boys aged 15-19, out of school	J		J		J		J	
11. Married boys aged 15-19**	K		K		K			K
Total:	A+B+C+D+E+F+G+H+I+J+K	A+B+E+G+H	C+D+F+I+J+K	A+B+C+D+E+F	G+H+I+J+K	A+C+G+I	B+D+E+F+H+J	E+F+K

*Married adolescent girls are rarely found in school; therefore, their schooling status is not indicated.

**Boys ages 10-14 are rarely married; therefore, they are not included on this worksheet.

Worksheet 2
Mapping Content of Adolescent Programs

Program Content Categories	Age group served	Gender*	Schooling status ^Δ	Activities reaching married adolescents	Numbers served annually	% of overall program effort — 20, 40, 60, 80, 100%	Key entry point?
Functional literacy and out of school learning							
Nutrition							
Reproductive health information							
Health services							
Livelihoods and skills training							
Savings opportunities/ economic literacy							
Offering protection/security to vulnerable adolescents							
Fostering adolescent participation in community and civic processes							
Offering opportunities to increase physical strength/ sport and gaming skills							
Establishing non-school, non-family learning/developmental spaces for young people							

* Solely or majority girls – G
 Solely or majority boys – B
 More or less equally mixed – M

^Δ Most participants in school – S
 Most participants out of school – O
 More or less equally mixed – M

Note: This worksheet and the program areas listed are illustrative only. In a given setting, these categories should be specified to reflect the context.